



RUDOLF STEINER¹

‘**R**EADING and writing must be learnt together. Do not be satisfied with showing the child, for example, the shape of the letter M. Let him hear the sound as you write it for him. Let him see it written, as it were, on the curve of your lips. . . . If you teach him about a plant, let him feel the connexion of that plant with the whole plant world ; with the rhythm and life of the whole universe.’

An outsider, strolling into an Oxford lecture-room last August, and hearing these words in a discourse on the new education, might not have suspected that he was listening to the author of *The Threefold State*, perhaps the most widely-read of all books on politics appearing since the war, or that he was in the presence of the leading German (some would certainly say the leading European) occultist. But he would have been struck by the lecturer’s sombre and commanding figure, the enthusiasm of his bearing and tone, and the alternating deliberateness and rapidity of his speech. And he would have noticed the constant recurrence, like a sort of pedal bass, of the words ‘comprehensiveness,’ ‘synthetic,’ ‘organism.’

Rudolf Steiner is certainly a man to arrest the attention. Born on the Austro-Hungarian border in 1861, the son of a

¹ The bibliography of Steiner’s published work is enormous. A very full list can be found at the end of *Fruits of Anthroposophy*, by G. Kaufmann (74 Grosvenor Street, W.1.) Happily most of his more important books have been translated : *The Philosophy of Freedom*, *An Outline of Occult Science*, *The Way of Initiation*, *Christianity as Mystical Fact*, *A Road to Self-Knowledge*, and *The Threefold State*. For readers of German, two books will be found of great interest : *Vom Lebenswerk Rudolf Steiners* ; *Eine Hoffnung neuer Kultur* (Munich, 1921), eleven essays on various aspects of Steiner’s work, edited by F. Rittelmeyer ; and *Grundriss der Anthroposophie* (Breslau, 1921), a full outline of Steiner’s teaching and system, chiefly in his own words, by W. Troeger.

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German railwayman, he had no advantages of birth or education. But in 1886 began the long series of his writings, in learned journals, periodicals, and books, on philosophical criticism, occult learning, education, science, politics, art, and religion. His work has grown continuously in volume and in influence. His followers are numbered by thousands, and found in every civilized country in the world; and shortly before the war he provided a centre for them and for his teaching, the new Mecca for a world-wide pilgrimage, in an enormous and striking building at Dornach, near Basle—the Goetheanum, as he has somewhat fancifully yet significantly called it. This place has become the appointed home for mystery plays, lectures, rhythmic dances, discussions, investigations and experiments of all kinds; the temple of the new spiritualism, as some would say; of the new science, according to others; as Steiner would claim, of the science of the spirit.

It is difficult to find a phrase to do justice to so many-sided a personality. For the very stress which Steiner lays on comprehensiveness and synthesis carries him outside the ordinary classes of thought and thinkers. And herein lies his significance for the complex and many-sided world of to-day, in Germany and in England. He has offers, and hopes, for all sides of life. In response to the vague and yearning demands constantly being made on education, politics, art, science and even religion, by men and women who ask, while they make them, ‘who will show us any good?’ Steiner has a definite system of ideas, and an array of positive aims, clear, synthetic (as he would say) and spiritual.

To some, this many-sided generosity will be at first bewildering and even irritating. ‘First things first’ is a cry that appeals to many serious people; and to show an equal interest in aesthetics and social reform and philosophy argues a dilettante or at least an amateur. The Church, too, has often shown its suspicion of ‘mere morality’ or

‘social service.’ For Steiner the word ‘mere,’ in this belittling sense, does not appear to exist. He is interested in everything as it comes.

And yet he is interested, not in many things, but one. ‘Synthesis’ is his watchword. Every demand, and still more every response, is to be correlated with every other. A comprehensive view of the world and of man is what the times require; a principle to be applied to all personal and social activities. If this can be found, it will be possible to produce a definite social programme, both political and religious. And this is what Steiner claims to have done.

It is perhaps worth while to examine this in a little more detail, and to see how this comprehensive view was gradually developed, both by the process of his inner thought and the pressure of outer events. Steiner first became known as a theosophist. The main tenets of theosophy are familiar. The true guidance for life is to be found in the occult wisdom handed down from Eastern sages, and found in the Vedas (rightly understood) and in Buddhism; also in Chinese and ancient Babylonian and Egyptian writings. From these can be gained an occult anthropology—the seven stages of human existence, the physical body, the etheric body, the animal soul, the ‘lower manas,’ the ‘higher manas,’ the spiritual soul, and the ‘atma’; and an occult cosmology—the ages, Atlantean and Lemurian, which preceded the present, the influence of the planets on this world, the existence of gaseous-bodied beings before the historic races of men, and the like. Revealed in mystical writings, such as the ‘Akasha Chronicles,’ this lore can also be obtained by clairvoyance, induced by appropriate spiritual discipline.

Its significance for individual lives is to be found in its teachings about Karma and reincarnation, its stress on brotherhood and ‘the one true religion,’ and a certain tone of patronage towards Christianity, which places Jesus on a hospitable platform by the side of Buddha, Confucius and

the rest of the world's great teachers and initiates. The alluring vagueness of all this links it easily to the 'higher thought,' to fascinating speculations about the myths of Osiris, or the Grail and the Rosicrucians, as well as to psychic research and the 'spiritualism' of the séance and the medium's cupboard.

Most of this appears in the voluminous writings of Steiner. But he takes up a distinct attitude of his own, uncompromising and confident, and not conducive to harmony in theosophic circles. He has his own anthropology. Beyond the physical, etheric and astral bodies are the ego (comprising the sentient, the rational, and the self-conscious souls) and the 'spirit-self,' the 'life-spirit,' and the 'spirit-man.'¹ And he has his own cosmology, in which, while there is much of the bizarre statements of the older theosophy, the centre is, strikingly enough, the appearance of Christ and the 'event on Golgotha.' 'The lofty sun-spirit came in human form as the great ideal for human life on earth.' 'The mission of mystery-teaching is henceforth to make man capable of recognizing the Christ incarnate in human nature, the only principle of being. From this central point of all wisdom, man was enabled to understand the natural and spiritual worlds.' Whether this was orthodox Christianity or not, it was certainly not orthodox theosophy.

Then came what to some would seem a bolder step. 'All this,' says Steiner in effect, 'is scientific, in its aims and its method. Man is surrounded by worlds for which he has the organs of perception. I have seen. Others, under like

¹The conception of these seven bodies colours all Steiner's thinking, e.g. in education, where he lays it down that as at birth the physical body is born (that is, released from its covering), so at the appearance of the second teeth the etheric body is born, and, at puberty, the astral; this fact must determine the kind of stories and information to be imparted at each age. In a curious tract on the Lord's Prayer, he finds that the seven clauses of that prayer refer to these seven stages in human evolution.

conditions, can do the same.'¹ To knowledge so acquired, scientific tests can be applied. The name of science indeed is far more appropriate here, he holds, than to the materialism which has laid claim to it. For it takes into account all the facts. And instead of ignoring life or keeping it to the last page of its thesis, it makes life the foundation.*

This knowledge, based on the search for 'the spiritual forces that slumber in mankind,' will transform life. It is not simply esoteric; it is esoteric-exoteric. It is already, we are told, making many new ideas available for healing and education, both of body and mind. And it is demanding disciples, reforms, and a vigorous and effective propaganda.

Those who had watched Steiner's earlier years might have foreseen something of this. Those years, from 1886 to 1905, were filled with keen, and, in the proper sense of the word, critical studies of Goethe, Kant, Hegel, Nietzsche, Fichte, and Haeckel. In Goethe more particularly he found the master and guide of his thinking. 'The more I elaborated my own independent conception of the universe, the more I felt I was understanding Goethe.' Goethe's hatred of abstractions, his perception of the life of nature as by an inner sense, and of Faust as a summary of the true evolution of humanity, Steiner made his own. Perhaps we should go farther back, and remember the untiring search for knowledge in the eager lad growing up in the midst of the pitiless economic life of Bismarckian Germany. Even in Atlantis he could never forget either Weimar or Chemnitz.

¹ 'Any one can understand occult lore,' he insists, 'if he permits his thought to move undisturbed by prejudice and with an unimpeded longing for truth.' He will have no 'mediumism' or 'visionary dreams.' 'To become a clairvoyant one need only open the eyes and ears of one's spirit.'

* Such a life, indeed, is a much larger thing than ordinary consciousness would suggest. 'The result of meditation is to feel that in this condition of the soul something forces its way in from a hitherto unknown world. We cannot, however, form a presentation of this unknown; we can only experience it' (*A Road to Self-Knowledge*).

For such a personality, the older theosophic circles were too small. A new society, the 'Anthroposophic,' took its rise in 1912, with 'Truth, Brotherhood, and the Spiritual Forces of Humanity' for its motto. The new title was significant. It was not intended to suggest lack of interest in God, or in such divine powers as theosophy had believed in; but a new interest in the relation of these to man, his achievements and his needs. Goethe would surely have approved. Under Steiner's guidance, the new society was to work out the new theory of knowledge, free from the one-sidedness and scepticism of Kant, and sternly opposed to the materialism of the debased economics and science rampant in both Germany and England. It was to be a science of the spiritual. 'The only kind of spirituality is that which informs the actual life of a man, and which shows itself no less active in mastering the practical tasks of life than in constituting a philosophy of the universe and of existence capable of satisfying the needs of the soul.'

For such a discipline an educational institute was necessary. This was found in the Waldorf school; here children could be trained in those specifically human functions which are based on anthroposophical principles and the definite order of development in the ages of the world and the races of man. This order, reproducing itself in the growth of the individual child, finds itself in that just and natural rhythm¹ which is the mark of all healthy life. At the opening of the Waldorf school Steiner urged that education must be something more than vocational. 'But we do not succeed in separating vocational from human education so long as we think of ourselves as teachers or educators. Something must be alive in us, invisible to the sense, and distinct from any calling or official position; something which will only be brought into actuality by future generations, and which by a kind of prophetic energy will grow into one with the future development of mankind.'

¹ *Eurhythmie*, to be distinguished from Dalcroze's 'eurhythmics.'

Two years after the founding of the new society came the war. In the ferment of antagonism to everything connected with the enemy, and the postponement of all problems and hopes to the great task of 'winning the war,' characteristic of England and Germany alike, Steiner kept his head. Indeed, he published in 1915 a pamphlet entitled *Thoughts during War-time, for Germans and those who do not believe in the duty of hatred*. For him, the war meant a new concentration on the social and political side of the great problem. It made clear the real task of Germany—to give a new freedom to Central Europe, not, on the principles of 'Wilsonism,' by guardianship, but by self-effacement. Naturally enough, such a message was unheeded at the time; but when, after the armistice, amid the ruins of the dreams which had captured her, Germany had time to look, half dazed, at the new world in which she found herself, Steiner came forward with the conception which is now, and will probably remain, the most widely associated with his name.

The Threefold State is not altogether a happy translation of the German term. 'Dreigliederung' means properly a division into three limbs; and the journal which exists to propagate the idea is called, with something of affectionate brevity, *The Three*. First used in 1919, the word made Steiner's previous political convictions explicit. It stands for a new theory of state organization—of what the state, properly understood, really is—which reminds us, now of Plato, now of National Guilds, but is really quite distinct from both. It might be viewed as an attack on the modern idea of the state, or as an alternative to the materialism which has been adopted all too seriously and thoroughly, as he holds, by Socialism from the science of the last century.

But it is more than this. It is an attempt to expound, in the structure of the state, the presence and function of those spiritual elements which are present in every manifestation of life. Economics (the sphere of exchange), politics (the

sphere of rights, of equity), and the spirit (the sphere of individual freedom and initiative) must be as independent in the state as are the brain, the heart, and the stomach in the animal organism. Only by such independence can the real unity of the state be attained.

At first sight this seems one of those statements which waver between the paradox and the truism. Its bearings are better understood when some of its immediate consequences are recognized. For example, that rights are not to be treated (and exchanged) as if they were commodities; that capital must not be owned, but only directed, by the body politic; that teaching, like religion, must be free; and that this freedom must be nourished and extended by the spiritual 'limb,' and preserved by the political 'limb,' of the one state. The futility of the single-state conception is seen in the fate of Austria-Hungary, or in the condition of Germany herself in 1918. Room must be found in the true state for all impulses, that is, for all classes of impulse. For the present condition of things is unnatural, and, as all can see, suicidal. 'The threefold conception,' however, 'is not a refuge of despair; it is a spiritual thought, linked with all the secrets of the universe.'

This phrase of Rittelmeyer's reveals the distinction between Steiner and the 'mere' political reformer. Rittelmeyer, like many other of Steiner's followers, pays but little attention to his master's clairvoyance. The question of the relative prominence of the clairvoyant element in Steiner's delineation of the foundations of the new state is really as unimportant as the question of the extent of the ecstatic element in Ezekiel's vision of the new Jerusalem.¹ The authority of the vision, if vision it be, must rest on its applicability to the facts of experience.

The time is far from ripe for a considered judgement on

¹ Oesterreich, in *Occultism at the Present Day*, suggests that Steiner's occult discoveries are simply subconscious modifications of Mme. Blavatsky's, which, to the psychological student, is quite possible.

this question. So much, however, may confidently be said : that we are faced to-day by two portentous dangers, materialism and a wild struggle for materialistic gains, and a régime of opportunist remedies and palliatives. Steiner's view is a robust defence against both of these. He emphasizes, but he does not over-emphasize, the spiritual; and he follows out a philosophical, that is, an adequate and comprehensive, conception of social life. 'All depends,' one may object, 'on how it is applied.' There is force in the objection. But, in all social history, real advances have been due to new principles. That is equally true of the rise of Christianity, the coming of the friars, and the evangelical revival. Once the principles are fixed, their applications will be almost as easy as expedients are to-day. It may be that Steiner's doctrine of spirit, as necessarily connected with the fundamental laws of all human and political and cosmic life, will rank with other great religious and formative conceptions of history.

To say this is to raise the question, What of Steiner's attitude to religion? As we have seen, Steiner claims to be religious, and not only religious but Christian. It was his conception of Christ as central that led to the break with theosophy. Whatever his followers may think of his mystical experiences, they are enthusiastically at one with him in the 'science of the spiritual,' interpreted as an attitude of devoted dependence on the spiritual world that may surely be called 'religious.'

But what is the relation of all this to Christianity? The answer can best be found in Steiner's book, *Christianity as Mystical Fact*. That Steiner is a mystic is clear enough. His is a Way of Life based on a definite relation to the unseen, involving both purgation and illumination.¹ And

¹ 'These powers arise only through a true knowledge of oneself; this means the repudiation of the natural desire to feel oneself of worth and importance; painful as such a repudiation must be, the soul must set itself to accomplish it' (*A Method of Self-Knowledge*). This is but one passage out of very many.

the claim to be a Christian must not be put on one side because it is not expressed in our dialect. It must be examined on its own merits. It can be summed up in the following four paragraphs :

(1) Christianity is a mystical approach to God. What was true of Plato and Plotinus was equally true of Augustine (a genuine Platonist) and Thomas (a Platonist quite as much as an Aristotelian).

(2) The Bible is a record of mystical teaching. To regard it as a record of historical fact only is like thinking (Steiner says) that Othello on the stage really kills Desdemona. For example, the raising of Lazarus is the record of an initiation carried out by Jesus ; ' the earthly must die a symbolic-real death ' ; ' the outer event was really enacted on the physical plane, but yet it was a symbol.' The Apocalypse is also the record of an initiation ; the white horse means creative thought, the red, creative strife, followed by the advent of justice and religion. All this was fully grasped by the Gnostics, who perhaps understood the spirit of their religion better than their orthodox opponents.

(3) Jesus was the great initiate. He brought a new conception of spiritual religion, which, unlike the ancient mysteries, was to belong to the whole of humanity. Golgotha is the summit of history, since, in the ' event ' thereon, Christ reveals the power now meant to be used by all. To quote another of Steiner's exponents, Christian Geyer, ' the death of Jesus means for humanity the complete transformation of death. It is seen to be the laying aside of the earthly body, and the return to the soul's spiritual home.' This may seem a very imperfect statement to the evangelical Christian ; but if the return to the soul's spiritual home means, as it must mean to every understanding reader of the Fourth Gospel, the return to full communion with God, what orthodox believer will deny that this was made possible by the death of Christ ?

(4) Thus Christianity is the fulfilment of all religions.

It is not their rival ; nor is it the one ' true ' as against the many ' false.' Whatever is vital in other religions is what they share with Christianity, or what they anticipate of it.

Suggestive as this is, it falls strangely on evangelical ears ; we can understand the words of a German pastor, written in controversy with Steiner in 1914 : ' In spite of all we have in common, our points of departure are too different for us to be able to arrive at an understanding, much less to combine together.'¹ To feel this is as natural as it is, in controversy, to forget that ' he that is not against us is for us.' But let us confront Steiner with the great evangelical conceptions of sin, salvation, faith, and the redeeming love of God in Christ.

(1) Sin : To Steiner the great foe is materialism ; the disastrous missing of the mark or cosmic norm for man and society. Sin thus involves far more than the separate acts of disobedience for which the individual may be considered wholly responsible. And this, it would appear, is true alike to psychology and to the Pauline doctrine of the ' reign ' of sin.

(2) Salvation : Steiner's is the salvation of the close of Plato's Republic ; to be ' friends of the gods,' in peace and harmony with the pre-established activities of the universe. Where this harmony is attained, there will be no failure, fear, or needless pain or desire. One may perhaps ask if salvation, as envisaged or enjoyed by the orthodox Christian, is more real than this. If the fruits by which a doctrine is to be judged include deliverance from pain and fear and anxiety and ill-temper, orthodoxy will have an account to settle even with ' Christian Science.'²

¹From a private letter dealing with Steiner's influence, written by the occupant of a professional chair in a German university, I quote the following : ' To sum up ; I welcome with delight the yearning for the spiritual as against the material ; I am drawn to the individuals who are animated by it ; but I cannot accept the means by which this yearning is to be set at rest.'

²The reader may compare the first chapter of A. G. Hogg's *Redemption from the World*.

(3) Faith : Steiner, as all his readers know, emphasizes knowledge. If faith is to be taken as equivalent to credulity or mere assent, we do not find it in Steiner. But if it means deep-seated confidence, leading to action and to risks, and based on an unshakeable confidence, it is surely there. 'Ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free.'

(4) The love of God : Here, the Christian will pause. There seems no room for God in Steiner's series of prehistoric ages. Jesus is not 'sent' by the Father ; He comes ; He appears. Yet the very coming of Jesus implies that behind or within the system, there is an eternal and loving wisdom, in accordance with which, in the 'event of Golgotha,' Christ dies for the world and for man's growth and peace.

It thus appears that, in spite of his curious and, to many, repellent occultism, and his emphasis on what many Christians have long neglected, combined with his neglect of what most readers of this paper will rightly emphasize, Steiner persists none the less in 'coming back to Christ.'

If nothing outside the traditional evangelical phrases is to be called Christianity, we must part company with Steiner. He thinks in terms of social and racial evolution ; of the universe and not of individuals. Yet how much of Paul and John is 'cosmic' also ! To think of the doctrines of the pre-existent and eternal Christ, of all creation in its birth-pangs even yet, or of the whole of things which 'consists' in Christ ; to remember the Lamb which was slain from the foundation of the world, or the eternal Word in Whom was life, is to reflect that more has been done for this majestic point of view by Steiner than by many accepted Christian teachers.

To recognize his work will not lead us to surrender our own belief in individual religion or conversion. Bunyan and Luther will remain for us what they were before. Augustine was not only a great mystic or 'initiate,' he was a great penitent. Nor need we turn from the duty of a

careful study of the Bible, as opposed to those hasty generalisations and discoveries of parallels of which many besides Steiner may seem to have been guilty. Still less shall we forget the unwearying emphasis that Jesus Himself laid on the doctrine of God as our Father. To substitute, for the evangelical appeal, the elements which Steiner took over from theosophy, and to replace 'Jesus saves you now' by the riddles of the 'Akashic records,' would be indeed to surrender a weapon which is not the less valuable because it has been so often used amiss.

But the evangelical may have much to learn from those who place their emphasis elsewhere. Steiner's central teaching, indeed, reads like an expansion of the first few verses of the Fourth Gospel. 'In opposition to the modern views of evolution' (so we may sum it up) 'the spirit, the divine principle of life in movement, was in the beginning of the history of the universe. It is in the fullest sense divine, at the very heart of things. All that is really alive springs from it; the whole universe moves in harmonious accord with it. The history and the struggle of life is the drama of the descent of this spirit into the lower realm, of light into darkness.' 'All things came to be' (as the Fourth Gospel has it), or 'stand together' (as Paul said), in the central activity which we call Christ, Who died on Calvary. They cannot be understood, or, save in error, regarded by themselves. To abstract is to destroy. See them in Christ, and know the truth, and be free.

To say this is clearly not to defend Steiner's whole *Weltanschauung*. A careful estimate of that would need a much longer paper. Some will think that Steiner has said too much of Christ as the explanation of the whole universe; some, that he has said too little of Jesus, as the Redeemer of a small but important part of that universe, the individual soul. But it cannot be denied that he sees, in the activity manifested once for all in Jesus, a guide for action in every sphere and interest of life, economic and

social, political and educational. 'The Christian religion,' he says, 'once revealed, can never disappear; once divinely incarnated, it can never be set aside. By other religions the full significance of Christianity is revealed.' Or, as Christian Geyer has put it, 'The Christ-impulse goes further than any previous religion. Its influence extends over the whole of humanity, and over the destiny of our earth and of the solar system. We have to do with a cosmic event, which passes over into its necessary consequences, whether observed by us or not. . . . Is not that the great theme of the preaching of Paul, who, with his supernatural call, announced Christ as a cosmic and world-transforming power?'

Steiner's 'science of the spiritual' is thus a challenge to our evangelical Christianity. It claims to interpret and to satisfy the movement and the longing of the age; to oppose materialism by its own spiritual impulses, and to supply and carry out a resolute propaganda to that important end. If we question those claims, we must see that we can make claims which will stand where they fail, and bring light where they leave darkness.

The convictions on which they rest are certainly inspiring an eager devotion, in many quarters, for which the modern Church has looked in vain. And if they embody, with whatever of human imperfection, some of those serene and mighty teachings and demands of the gospel of Christ of which, as we must confess, the Church has hitherto taken but little account, we shall not regard the whole system as false or negligible. We shall not destroy our own organization or desert our own creeds. But we shall do well to break up our fallow ground, and to enlarge our own conceptions of religious life and service. Perhaps in so doing, with hopes and intentions as daring and prophetic as his, we may widen the channels of the sacred stream of the Spirit which flows from beneath the altar of the Lord, till the now thirsty and barren land has become rivers of living water.

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